

## *Wisconsin Folks: Masters of Tradition*



Karen Ann Hoffman, born 1957 in Oshkosh, is a member of the Oneida Nation of Wisconsin, part of the Iroquois Confederacy. She lives in Stevens Point. Karen Ann specializes in Iroquois raised beadwork, a style of Woodland beadwork unique to the six Iroquois nations and embodying Iroquois worldview. She learned the art from Cayuga beaders Samuel Thomas and his mother Lorna Hill, key contemporary artists in this tradition. An urn she made and beaded was recently acquired by the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian.

The beadwork's distinctive raised effect comes from using more beads than minimally needed to fit a space in the design, causing the beads to arch. The more extra beads that are used, the higher the arch.

Most Iroquois raised beadwork features glass beads on velvet. Many items in the tradition, such as pincushions, came about through Iroquois tourist trade at Niagara Falls or the New York State Fair; they are known as "whimsies." Other items, such as bags or collars, are made for personal use. Karen Ann makes all parts of her pieces, using sawdust or cattail fluff to stuff the whimsies.

Birds and flowers are common motifs and represent stories, practices and beliefs important in Iroquois culture. Karen Ann conveyed these and other contextual elements of the art form to her two apprentices as they met weekly. One apprentice, Chris Munson, expressed appreciation not only for learning the core skills but also for the opportunity "to share Oneida language and culture resources, hear stories and explanations of works created by master artists, become familiar with online resources to identify bead and fabric companies, research historic pieces to learn elements of design, and share the art, culture and stories with family, friends and local communities."

Just as the artwork embodies Iroquois values, Karen Ann found the apprenticeship to do the same. "I was delighted when my original student (Chris) broached the idea of including another young Iroquois woman (Samantha Lawien) in our project. It was then that I knew Chris had internalized the values of Iroquoia and was using this apprenticeship as a vehicle to act out those values."

Samantha observed, "I felt that one could never learn all that there is to learn about a craft such as this. My overall goal is to produce beautiful work in likeness of traditional work."

Chris reflected, "Wednesday nights became a beacon of happiness in my week...it was clear we were meeting with a purpose, sharing knowledge, creating beauty, infusing our own stories into our creations, and continually learning from the beads."

The dedication shown by the apprentices inspired Karen Ann "to dig more deeply, think more critically and strengthen my cultural connections to our art."